Philosophic Exchange

Volume 33 | Number 1 Article 4

2003

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Introduction: Entering a Discipline

As philosophers, we often think of our work as radical, no matter what our political orientation, because our intellectual work makes an unusual, often critical, contribution to society. Yet our discipline seems deeply conservative. We require novices to master an enormous body of literature, and to demonstrate their ability to speak in its voice, before we will even give their own ideas a hearing. Once they have gained a hearing, we expect them to continue to display a special sort of intellectual virtuosity. The mark of a great scholar is the ability to speak creatively using the well-worn words of our most famous philosophers. The more literature a scholar can command in this way, the more learned and original she or he seems.

Given the conservative nature of our discipline, how do we succeed at criticizing our ancestors, at introducing new ideas, and at changing with the intellectual currents? We do it, I think, by reinterpreting the language we inherit in ways that both honor its older meanings and introduce new ones. Here I would like to explore two quite different examples of this process of reinterpretation. Each is the work of a philosopher-theologian who self-consciously reinterprets a body of knowledge and offers a theory of meaning justifying the act of reinterpretation. The first is the work of Philo of Alexandria, who in the first century C.E. read Jewish scripture through the lens of Greek philosophy. The second is the work of Mary Daly, a contemporary feminist philosopher and theologian who has tried to recover older, empowering meanings behind the most sexist language she can identify. Each of them enters into a tradition of language and thought, and uses a particular metaphorical technique to point the familiar language in a new direction. By studying the techniques they use, we can become more aware of the way we conduct our practice as readers, teachers, and writers of philosophy, and perhaps we can even become more effective in our playful work. Their techniques are quite close to the description of the practice of philosophy offered by existential phenomenologist Gabriel Marcel. Thus, I will close by drawing parallels between Marcel's view of the use of metaphor in philosophy and the metaphorical techniques used by Philo and Daly.

Tradition and Innovation

I begin by defining tradition with reference to a quotation from Hans-Georg Gadamer:

> Understanding is not to be thought of so much as an action of one's subjectivity, but as the placing of oneself within a

tradition, in which past and present are constantly fused.[1]

According to this quotation, understanding is not something any one of us does alone. We do it with the aid of a multitude of thinkers and voices. By placing ourselves within the midst of their conversation, we become a part of their tradition. Our understandings, however novel, are part of an unfolding tradition, in which the past we inherit meets the present we question in order to create a novel future. This broad sense of what a "tradition" is departs somewhat from our everyday usage. In everyday usage, tradition is opposed to innovation. Tradition is static, while innovation is dynamic; tradition is old, while innovation is new. In this narrow, more conventional usage, tradition is a body of doctrine. In the broader usage offered by Gadamer, tradition is a process, the constant meshing of old and new.[2]

As old and new meet, language evolves. As contemporary experience is measured against the well-used categories of familiar language, it is classified and understood. At the same time, well-used language is tested to see if it can speak to contemporary experience. As a result of this process, language is sometimes discarded and replaced with newly-invented or imported terms. Other times, familiar language is reinterpreted to include in its connotations new experiences or information. Still other times, contemporary experience is denied because it cannot be spoken of comfortably using familiar categories. We can see this process at work in the application of case precedents in appellate law; in a child's continuous attempt to understand the complex social rules we require her or him to follow; in psychology's ongoing attempts to define, classify, and thus heal specific mental disorders; in the ongoing quest to define which linguistic forms are sexist and how they can be replaced; and in the struggles of scientifically minded modern people to approach the mysterious religions they inherited.

Philo and the Reinterpretation of Hebrew Scripture

I became acutely aware of "tradition" defined in Gadamer's broader sense when, a few years ago, I set out to approach a particular textual "tradition," which I defined in the narrower sense. With my newly polished Hebrew skills in hand, I set out to begin study of traditional Jewish texts. Philosopher that I am, I expected to open them and find philosophical ideas. That expectation came not only from my own desires, but also from my reading of secondary sources about the history of Jewish thought. Those secondary sources presented, in distilled and translated format, essential ethical, epistemological, and metaphysical ideas in Judaism.

Thus I was quite surprised to open the texts and find in them absolutely nothing familiar. I found no literature reviews, no systematic studies of the works of great thinkers, no linear logical arguments, no introductory definitions of terms. In fact, everything I opened — from legal discussions to mystical allegories — looked suspiciously like a biblical commentary. Biblical commentary, rather than any of the markers I associate with philosophy, seemed to be

the definitive criterion for inclusion in this literary canon.

Of course I figured out that this form is mandated by the authority of tradition. Tradition, understood in the narrow sense of unchanging practice, requires that new ideas appear continuous with the older ideas. Tradition, understood in the broad sense of ongoing negotiation between past and present, requires that the discussion take place in an intelligible language. In this context, the language of scripture is the language of Jewish religious tradition, broadly understood.[3] Anything religiously meaningful that can be said must be said in that language. The words and phrases of this language cannot change. They are physically fixed in authoritative manuscripts. Only the interpretation of words and phrases can change. Thus, for the intellectual conversation to continue, it must be acknowledged that words can have multiple meanings. And in fact Jewish scriptural hermeneutics includes highly elaborated theories of meaning describing the multiple levels of interpretation that can be applied to any linguistic expression.[4]

The earliest written example we have of a radical Jewish teaching presented in the language of scripture, complete with a theory of meaning to justify the reading, is the work of Philo of Alexandria (c. 20 B.C.E. - 40 C.E.). Philo believed that the true spiritual teaching was found in Plato's philosophy, particularly in the dialogues the *Republic*, the *Phaedo*, and the *Timaeus*. When he rediscovered his Jewish heritage, and immersed himself in its scriptural tradition, he saw the tradition as an attempt to express the one true spiritual teaching - Plato's. He saw Moses as the quintessential philosopher who deliberately coded Platouic-type teachings into Jewish law.[5]

For Plato, as Philo understands him, philosophy is a journey from enslavement in the "visible world" to enlightenment in the "invisible world." The visible world is the one we see with the senses. It is a world of "becoming," of temporary, ever-changing forms. The invisible world, on the other hand, is accessible only through the intellect. It is a world of "Being," of eternal forms, stable and unchanging. It is the truly real world of ideas and essences. A philosopher spends a lifetime learning to turn away from the bodily senses that show only the visible world, and towards the intellect that reveals the invisible world. Because the body engages a person in desires whose satisfaction brings only temporary gain, a philosopher learns to shun the body and develop the soul which, being eternal, can perceive eternal essences.[6]

Philo finds in Plato's ideas the theory of meaning he will use to justify his radical reading of scripture. Like everything that manifests in the visible world, scripture has a body and a soul. The body of the scripture would be its sensory content, the imagery offered by the lively stories and highly developed ritual prescriptions. But the soul of scripture would be its philosophical content, its instructions for subduing the human body and developing the human soul. Philo's attention is particularly caught by those aspects of the scripture's body that seem odd, such as superfluous details, fragmentary narratives, or statements that seem too obvious to be as emphasized as they are. He sees these as invitations to look beyond the body to the soul.

One of the most widely read examples of Philo's hermeneutic is the short passage that he refers to as the story of the "giants," Genesis 6:1-4, immediately preceding the story of Noah and the flood. Here is Philo's version of the verses:

> And it came to pass when there began to be many men upon the earth, that daughters also were born to them. And when the angels of God saw the daughters of men that they were beautiful, they took unto themselves wives of all of them whom they chose. For the Lord said, My spirit shall not remain among men forever, because they are flesh. And there were giants on the earth in those days.[7]

The verses are widely acknowledged to be cryptic. The Hebrew text is obviously corrupted, as it does not make grammatical sense. Interpretations available in Philo's time read the verses as alluding to fallen angels who married human women, producing abominable hybrid children who laid waste the earth and provoked God to destroy it by flood.[8] Philo, of course, would have seen those traditions as elaborate garments for the body of scripture, containing no pointers for the philosophical journey. He reads the cryptic passage as a straightforward statement of the philosopher's spirituality.

According to Philo, the angels of God are metaphors for the human soul. The air, he says, is in fact filled with hovering spirits. When scripture says the angels see beautiful women and take wives, it allegorically describes the fact that spirits incarnate in human bodies. To a human body, God's spirit brings the gift of wisdom. But bodies, as scripture points out, are made of flesh. They are drawn after material desires; they eventually decay. Thus wisdom — God's spirit — cannot remain in them forever. Some people understand this intuitively and know how to transform themselves into vessels for wisdom; they are the giants among us.[9]

For Philo, Jewish scripture is an extended example of what Aristotle calls a "proportional metaphor." Such a metaphor is a strict proportion of the form a:b::c:d. It is more like a riddle than like a statement. A good proportional metaphor will have a great conceptual distance between the terms, inviting listeners to see similarities between things that are far apart.[10] As Philo uses the form of the proportional analogy, it is more like a proposal than a riddle. He proposes that all scripture be reread with a particular metaphysics in mind. Thus, Philo brings the same two terms, soul:body, to every passage of scripture he reads. In this case, he proposes that soul:body::angels:their human wives. As angels took human wives, so the soul is attached to the body. As the human wives could not live forever with their husbands, so the body is not eternal along with the soul. The giant is the wise person who knows this metaphorical code.

Philo's aim is not to obliterate a superficial reading of scripture, but to see it as a vehicle for a deeper meaning. The intellectual journey, for him, consists in understanding the relation of body to soul, and of the visible world to the invisible world. He needs both terms of his proportional metaphor for his

project to make sense. In fact, he does not wish to overthrow tradition in the narrow sense of the word, but to participate in tradition in the broad sense.

Daly's Web of Feminist Language

Mary Daly is best known as a radical feminist theologian who challenged Catholic theology during the 1980s in increasingly irreverent ways. A careful look at her work, however, suggests that intellectually she is not the sort of radical who wants to overthrow tradition in the narrow sense of the word. Instead, she aims to participate in tradition in the broad sense of the word, designing and communicating new meanings using the very language of the tradition. She claims, in fact, that her innovations are more traditional than the conventions she attacks, for they dis-cover earlier, suppressed meanings of words.

Like Philo, Daly brings a particular theology to her work. Her deity, if one could use that word, is Be-ing, in her definition, the "Ultimate/Intimate Reality, the constantly Unfolding Verb of Verbs which is intransitive, having no object that limits its dynamism."[11] Patriarchal society, she contends, has limited people's access to Being, dressing Being up in dogmatic religious systems that demand allegiance to the terms of the system rather than to ethical or spiritual experience. In particular, she stresses, religious and social systems have hidden from women the joy of participating in the Unfolding Verb of Verbs by promulgating mind-numbing ideologies of "woman's place."[12] Her aim, particularly in her later works, is to "dis-cover," by which she means "uncover," the radical possibilities of Being outside of the conventions she calls "mystifications."[13]

Philosophers will recognize in her ideas the influence of Martin Heidegger. In his later writings, Heidegger spoke of true thinking as pushing at the boundaries of the regions into which we normally classify objects.[14] He invited his readers to listen to language which, he wrote, often escapes our attempts to control it and speaks to us from beyond the borders of our knowledge. He sometimes investigated a line of thinking by following a thread of etymologies to understand the ideas at play in a particular linguistic expression.[15]

A centerpiece of Daly's method is linguistic play. Language, she believes, holds within it long-forgotten meanings that reveal possibilities excluded by our society. Conventional meanings, in fact, sometimes depend upon earlier meanings, as when a word once understood as a compliment takes on a negative connotation. Words are implicated in wide "webs" of meaning. The word "web" alludes both to the shape of Daly's research as she traces etymologies through various scholarly dictionaries and to the work of women as weavers - in her case, word-weavers. Through her work, she aims to bring webs of lost meanings to consciousness by deliberately using words in subversive ways.

The title of the book in which Daly, together with Jane Caputi, sets out a philosophy of language, along with a short dictionary of subversive radical feminist words, offers an illustration of her project. *Webster's First New Intergalactic Wickedary of the English Language* contains within it several word-

plays. Dictionaries gain legitimacy by using the name "Webster" in the title, and this one is no exception. However, in this case, "Webster" does not refer to the name of an eighteenth-century American linguist. A "webster," says Daly, is a woman whose occupation it is to weave, a weaver of words and word webs. The word "wickedary" plays on the word "dictionary," and is defined by Daly as a "Wicked/Wiccen Dictionary." The biographical statement Daly chooses to put on the back of the book offers an even stronger statement of her project. "Mary Daly is a Positively Revolting Hag..." she writes. Even without the guidance of her *Wickedary*, it is possible to guess her intentions in this wordplay. She is "revolting" by deliberately offering a subversive feminist philosophy. Her activities are "positive," perhaps pro-active, even if they inspire disgust from others. And she is clearly using "Hag" as a badge of honor, to indicate her pride in her role as offensive gadfly, as a woman who refuses to adopt the aesthetic standards of patriarchal society, and as the heir of terrible, powerful female demons, such as Harpies, Witches, Crones, and Hags.

Daly's word weaving is another illustration of the role of a common language in the process of tradition broadly understood. She does not wish to change the physical signs of our language, the actual words that carry meaning. Nor does she simply wish to change their meanings. Instead, she wishes to highlight the contrast between mainstream meanings and the radical feminist readings she gives to relevant words. The effectiveness of the project — and its cleverness in the eyes of those who appreciate it — depends upon the old and new meanings standing side by side.

The power of the approach is illustrated nicely in Max Black's interaction theory of metaphor. A term used in a familiar way is placed in a new context, where it is linked with a term used in a more unusual way. The associated meanings that accompany the unusual term become associated with the familiar term and vice versa. Both words come to hold more meaning, because their webs of "associated commonplaces," to use Black's words, grow.[16]

In Daly's work, we have several examples of a familiar term appearing in a new context. The term "Webster's," for example, which normally carries the connotation of "historical authority of an important linguist" is placed in the context of the name of a feminist dictionary, right near a drawing of a spider's web in the light of the moon. Immediately, the word "webster" takes on the connotation of a web weaver. If we see what Daly wants us to see, the authoritative proper name "Webster" will appear to us as the name of a particular webweaver. We will begin to understand that dictionaries help weave the web of static language that cuts off access to Ultimate Being, the dynamic Verb of Verbs. We will understand that the feminist webweaver's task is to weave an alternative web, one that can serve as a ladder out of the static into the dynamic. In making this point or, perhaps, in weaving this web, Daly depends upon the interaction of old and new meanings.

Learning from Metaphor

Philo explores scriptural teachings about the human soul's metaphysical and

spiritual pre-eminence over the human body. His reading of the Hebrew Bible is at odds with the metaphysics of the dominant rabbinic tradition, which sees a human being as a balanced integration of mind and body. Thus, one might be tempted to inquire whether the philosophy Philo extrapolates is really written into the scriptures. In attempting to gather evidence, one could ask Philo for proof that Moses was acquainted with the philosophical tradition that inspired Plato. However, this seems to me the wrong line of questioning for two reasons. First, scholars acknowledge that the authorship of the Hebrew scriptures is uncertain. While the Jewish mythological tradition names Moses as the author of the five books of the Torah, many signs point away from his authorship. Thus an account of Moses's Greek philosophical education would not show that a philosophy like Plato's was consciously written into the Torah. And without a definitive knowledge of authorship, scholars cannot definitively assess the author's educational milieu. Second, Philo himself acknowledges that he is mining the text for meanings that give direction to a spiritual seeker. The test of Philo's reading would therefore be its usefulness to the spiritual seeker. Does the Jewish spiritual seeker gain direction in spiritual practice by thinking about herself or himself as a soul? Does the seeker grow in religious morality by learning to separate the soul from the body?

Similarly, when one reads Mary Daly's linguistic explorations, one is tempted to ask whether the meanings she brings out are really in the English language. But this question would be superfluous. Daly demonstrates that these meanings are part of the history of our language. One might then be tempted to ask whether the histories of English words are as significant as Daly makes them out to be. After all, if speakers are not aware of these histories when they speak, one cannot argue that these histories affect consciousness. This question is superfluous as well, for Daly's work does not rely on prior awareness of the meanings she uncovers. A reader's surprise and delight (or perhaps annoyance, depending upon the reader's politics) upon discovering Daly's reinterpretations shows that they are not part of our everyday awareness. Rather, they enter awareness as a reader begins to hold the new and old meanings in consciousness simultaneously. In Daly's case as well as Philo's the question is one of application. Good evaluative questions thus ask: What is to be gained by using language in this playful way? By calling myself a "revolting hag," for example, what can I learn about the possibilities for individual growth and social change?

The point of proposing a metaphor is not to offer evidence for the empirical assumptions that make it comprehensible. The point is to point a thinker towards new possibilities. As Aristotle noted, a proportional metaphor invites listeners to see new similarities. As Black notes in his interaction theory of metaphor, webs of associated commonplaces grow when terms are juxtaposed in novel ways. Thus it makes sense to evaluate metaphors by examining what we learn from them as the terms interact. A successful metaphor, used as Philo and Daly use metaphor, will not simply suggest one more or less correct idea to all thinkers. Instead, it will enable thinkers to step out on a journey of discovery. To return to Gadamer's view of tradition, the exploration of metaphor can be

one vehicle for the growth of tradition. Language inherited as part of a received tradition is placed in a new context. The context may be suggested by an evolving intellectual and social climate, which makes it possible to read the familiar in a new way. The old language remains, but new webs of associated commonplaces become attached to it.

Conclusion: Implications for Philosophy

Existential phenomenologist Gabriel Marcel goes so far as to identify the process of philosophical thinking with the exploration of metaphor.[17] For Marcel, a philosopher begins to study a philosophical mystery by proposing a metaphor, which may be suggested by personal experience, philosophical literature, or scientific theory. The philosopher then "walks around," so to speak, in the metaphor, following the landscape created by the interaction of terms as it unfolds. During this walkabout, the philosopher compares the landscape with other facts, values, and theories to determine if the metaphor offers a fruitful way of talking about the mystery.

Marcel offers many examples of the process of philosophizing by exploring metaphor. His most foundational and far-reaching example may be his analysis of the metaphor of "walking around in a metaphor" as a possible way of understanding the process of philosophical exploration itself. Philosophers whose thought is more rationally structured than his own might object to the open-endedness of metaphor. Philosophy, they might say, depends upon "discursive thinking." Marcel answers this imagined objection using the very method he is trying to defend. The nature of discursive thinking, he says, is itself a mystery that we speak of metaphorically. For a discourse is a line of thinking from beginning premises to a conclusion, a purposive journey from one place to another. It "rests on a simple physical image like that of walking along a road."[18] Imagine, Marcel says,

> as if I had so far been following what tracks there were across a country that appeared to me to be largely unexplored, and as if you had asked me to construct a main road in the place of these interrupted paths...[19]

That would be a representation of discursive thinking, taking steps down a narrow road whose boundaries on either side are marked by the rules of logical demonstration.

However, the act of laying down a road does not match Marcel's experience of philosophical thinking. When one lays down a road, one fixes in advance the destination she or he will come to at the end of the journey. Surely philosophers do not want to specify the form of their results in advance. Philosophy should not be overly constrained by rules about what counts as data in the way that most scientific disciplines are. The way to understand a particular mystery might be to represent it metaphorically, or to hone in on its essence through a definition, or even, in the end, to declare that no linguistic

representation is adequate to it.

Marcel's metaphorical analysis of the nature of philosophy uses the same techniques of proportional metaphor and interaction theory displayed in the works of Philo and Daly. Marcel begins by offering a simple statement for review: Philosophy should use discursive thinking. As he begins to review the statement, he reflects on the etymology of the term "discursive." He is led to the term "discourse," and uses it to expand his original statement into a two-term analogy.

Philosophical discourse is like a road.

Next, Marcel begins to explore the interaction of the two terms. Thinking of philosophy as a road highlights certain features of it. Analytically minded philosophers do operate with an image something like a road: picturing philosophical thinking as a straight line, drawn within certain boundaries, able to be represented in a linear proof, as a list of steps written vertically from top to bottom, equally able to be traversed in either direction. If it can be traversed from either direction, Marcel reasons, then the results exist as soon as the first premise is proposed.

Marcel is then able to articulate more fully a proportional metaphor:

results : philosophical discourse :: destination : road

He notes that there is a distance between the two sides of the metaphor. It is quite a stretch to think of philosophical discourse directed by its results in the way that construction of a road is directed by the fixed destination of the road. Marcel finds that there is too much distance between the terms for him to take the metaphor seriously. In fact, he wants to assert the negation of this metaphor as part of the definition of philosophical practice. Marcel expresses his own understanding of philosophy by contrasting it with an older, more established understanding that he is rejecting. He takes familiar language for talking about philosophical thinking, i.e., the term "discursive thinking" or "discourse." Through a metaphorical exploration, he reinterprets the idea of "discourse" in order to argue that it is too limiting. Instead, he suggests, we need new, open-ended ways of understanding philosophical practice that make room for imagination, metaphorical brainstorming, and the explicit exploration of concrete images.

Like Philo and Daly, Marcel succeeds at criticizing his ancestors, introducing new ideas, and helping philosophy change as intellectual currents do. He does this by reinterpreting the language he has inherited in ways that both honor its older meanings and introduce new ones. He justifies the act of reinterpretation by arguing that exploring the meaning of philosophical mysteries is a metaphorical process and can only be understood metaphorically. His reinterpretations depend upon his ability to hold the old meaning side by side with the new, comparing and contrasting them. In other words, his reinterpretations depend

upon his and his readers' ability to enter into the philosophical tradition, given Gadamer's definition of tradition.

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Endnotes

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2 Laura Duhan Kaplan, "Three Applications of Gadamer's Hermeneutics: Philosophy, Faith, and Feminism" in *Feminist Interpretations of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, ed. Lorraine Code (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002), pp. 367-376.

3 Jacob Neusner, *Introduction to Rabbinic Literature* (Anchor Bible Reference Library,1999), pp. 92-93.

4 Immanual Shochet, "Gimatryia: The Principle of Numerical Interpretation" in Gutman G. Locks, *The Spice of Torah-Gematria* (New York: Judaica Press, 1998), pp. iv-xiv.

5 Laura Duhan Kaplan, "Body and Soul: Roots of Remezim in Philo of Alexandria," *Maqom Journal of Rabbinic Literature*, vol. 3 (Summer 2002), pp. 1-12.

6 Plato, *Collected Dialogues of Plato, Including the Letters*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), pp. 48-52 (from the *Phaedo*) and pp. 740-750 (from the *Republic*).

7 Philo of Alexandria, "On the Giants," in *The Works of Philo*, transl. C.D. Yonge (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993), pp. 152-156. The verses are scattered through Philo's analysis.

8 Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11: A Continental Commentary*, trans. John J. Scullion (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, [1974]1994), p. 365.

9 Philo of Alexandria, "On the Giants," in *The Works of Philo*, pp. 152-157.

10 Aristotle, *On Poetry and Style*, trans. G.M.E. Grube (New York: Macmillan, 1987), pp. 45, 70, 93.

11 Mary Daly with Jane Caputi, *Webster's First New Intergalactic Wickedary of the English Language* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987), p. 64.

12 Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, [1973]) 1985, pp. 13-43.

13 Daly, *Wickedary*, pp. 4-8.

[14] Martin Heidegger, "Conversation on a Country Path," in *Discourse on Thinking* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), pp. 58-90.

[15] Martin Heidegger, "Building, Dwelling, Thinking," in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1971), pp. 141-160.

[16] Max Black, *Models and Metaphors* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press),1962; "More About Metaphor," in *Metaphor and Thought*, ed. Andrew Ortony (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979), pp. 19-43.

[17] Gabriel Marcel, *The Mystery of Being* (Chicago: Regnery, 1950). The use of metaphor in philosophy is discussed in the first chapter. In the remainder of the work, it is applied to various philosophical questions.

[18] Marcel, p. 6.

[19] Ibid., p. 3.